Post-Digital Art History

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Post-Digital Art History

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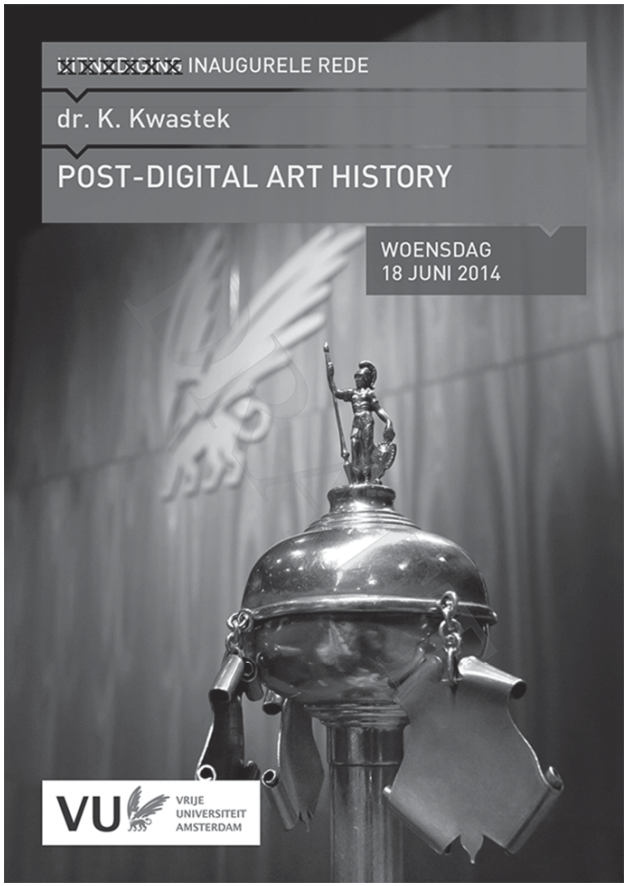


[THIS IS A PIECE OF GREY LITERATURE]

This is the written version of my inaugural lecture.

It has been printed before the delivery of the actual lecture. I cannot guarantee that I'll stay entirely close to the text. I also might have to shorten it a bit.

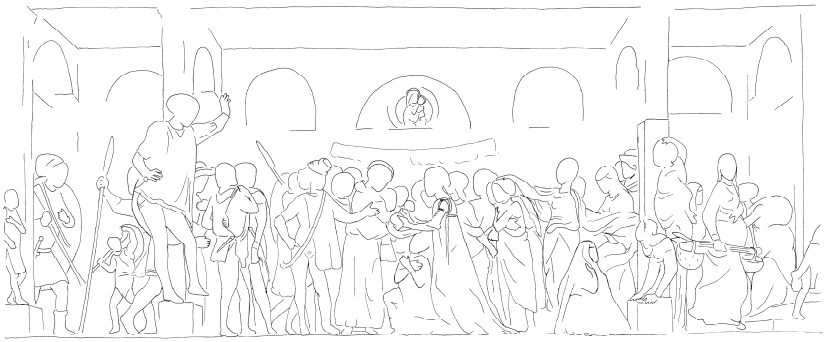
So maybe this is not exactly the written version of my inaugural lecture.

POST-DIGITAL ART HISTORY[1]

Mijnheer de rector, dames en heren,

Hoewel collega's, studenten, en buren ijverig met mij oefenen, doe ik dit toch nog liever in het Engels.

Before the Dean's introduction, Henk Verhoef, the VU's organist, played Georg Philipp Telemann, nr. 8 *La Gaillardise* from *Marches héroiques* on our Couperin-Organ. He is going to play Jean-Philippe Rameau's chaconne from *Dardanus* later on. The piece our Professor for Organ Musicology, Hans Fidom, just played for you was a composition by John Cage, entitled *Souvenir*. I also want to start this lecture with a souvenir.



1 Contour drawing of Donatello's Miracle of the New-born Child*, 1447-50, Basilica di Sant Antonio, Padua.*

This is a rendering, or contour drawing, of a bronze relief by Italian Renaissance sculptor Donatello, showing a scene from the life of Anthony of Padua. I produced this rendering way back in the 1990s, overlaying a sheet of tracing paper over a photographic reproduction of the work. It was part of my Master's thesis research conducted at the University of Cologne, entitled 'Kostümfragen zu Donatellos Paduanischen Reliefs'.

[1] Thanks to Sven Lütticken and Koos Bosma for critical comments and suggestions, and to Angela Bartholomew for editorial revisions.

This part is a self-quotation. I already made this point during a lecture given on October 12th 2012 at the Hirshhorn Museum Washington, and put it in writing for an edited collection, which is in process.

I still remember how – after sitting at my desk for at least two days in a row to carefully produce renderings of each of the four reliefs that constituted my object of study – I kept mentally constructing line contours around any object in my field of vision, long after I had gotten up from my desk and was looking at the 'real world' again.

I committed to this exercise because I wanted to be able to study the individual figures of the relief in detail. The starting point for my thesis was my fascination with the costumes worn by the people of these reliefs. While the reliefs depict stories from the 13th century, they show a crowd of people dressed both in antique and contemporary costumes.

If future generations will look at source material left over from this inaugural lecture, they might be just as puzzled as I was. They might wonder why professors in the 21st century would wear togas and berets, and why an invitation for an inaugural lecture with the title 'Post-digital Art History' would show a silver scepter in front of a blurry background of 1970s interior architecture.

The fact that I didn't specifically choose this image for my lecture (it is the standard image used for such invitations), is only a partial explanation. We use historic costumes and objects to contextualize events symbolically, or to attract attention by means of distinction. We wear the toga to emphasize the fact that the professors of a university belong to a group with certain shared ideals and traditions. Graphic designers may choose a blurry background to give more presence to the text, but also to the symbolic object – the scepter of the beadle, which represents both the long tradition of academia and a general veneration for the arts and sciences – showcasing Minerva, their patron goddess.

2 Douglas Coupland, Digital Orca, *2010, powder coated steel, Vancouver, BC.*

In 2010, Canadian author and artist Douglas Coupland erected a huge sculpture of an orca whale in front of Vancouver's convention center. It is pixelated, or, to be precise, voxelated – as three-dimensional pixels are officially called voxels. The work featured as a key example of the 'New Aesthetic', a term coined by James Bridle in 2011 to describe the expansion of visual properties associated with 'the digital' into our material world.[2] The term serves as the title for a tumblr blog – simply put, an online archive of images, videos, and texts – which collects exemplary New Aesthetic artifacts.

The examples featured on this blog far exceed that which we might consider to be works of high art; they also include technological innovations, and design objects such as pixelated umbrellas, or polygon-shaped shoes. But let me first stick to the orca whale. Coupland's sculpture features pixels (or voxels). Yet while digital images by default looked pixelated in the early days of computer graphics, we are rarely able to distinguish pixels on today's high-resolution screens – despite the fact that these screens still rely upon the same technology. As such, Coupland's sculpture actually works with two registers of transfer. It transfers a visual property associated with 'the digital' to our material world, but it also transfers a visual effect from the early days of computer graphics to a contemporary artifact.

What becomes evident in comparing these three examples: the Donatello reliefs, the inaugural lecture, and the Coupland whale, is that

[2] The New Aesthetic tumblr, launched by James Bridle in May 2011, at http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com/ (accessed June 2014).

the conscious adoption or montage of styles and symbols stemming from different historical periods, or media contexts, has long been a common practice in our visual and material culture. But how does this relate to the title of my lecture? How does it relate to a post-digital art history?

POST-digital art history

You could argue that putting the prefix 'post' in front of any buzzword is a cheap way to generate attention without having to come up with anything truly new. On the other hand, it is already a bit embarrassing to do so, as the qualification of something as 'post' has been applied all too frequently in contemporary art and media theory. This is likely why Florian Cramer, in a recent publication, argues that the post-digital is "a term that sucks, but is useful."[3] The prefix 'post' is useful because it has become far more than a denotation of a 'coming after' in terms of time. Rather it is used to question some established concept which we might have all too easily taken for granted. It emphasizes a need for differentiation and critical review, a skepticism about the universal validity of a certain concept.[4]

Post-DIGITAL art history

Often the concept to which the prefix 'post' is added is questionable in itself. I don't want to make this a linguistics or informatics lecture, so let me just state that I will use the notion of the digital rather metaphorically. I will not restrict its usage to information that is represented in discrete numbers and thus computable, but I will apply

[3] Florian Cramer, 'What is 'Post-Digital', in *APRA, A Peer Reviewed Journal About* 3.1 (2014): Post-Digital Research, at http://www.aprja.net/?p=1318 (accessed June 2014).
[4] Such an interpretation of the prefix 'post' has, among others, been proposed by Fredric Jameson in his characterization of postmodernism as "theorizing its own condition of possibility." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham (Duke University Press) 1992, p. IX.

it to generally denote technological systems which, in one way or another, are based on computational processes.

POST-DIGITAL art history

The term 'post-digital', in this broader sense, calls for a review of the role of digital technologies in contemporary society.

This text was formulated as part of a press summary for this lecture, before it was actually written.

In 1998, Nicholas Negroponte, founder of MIT's Media Lab, announced the end of the digital revolution. It was his predilection that digital technologies would soon become so commonplace and ubiquitous that they would be taken for granted like air and water.[5]

Today we know that the seminal societal changes digital technology has brought about were all but complete in 1998. And we have plenty of reason to assume that they are far from finished today. But Negroponte was right to foresee the increasing ubiquity of 'the digital'.

Today, digital technology is deeply embedded in the various devices we use on a daily basis. It also informs our everyday behavior – just think of the smartphone serving as a multimedia communication channel, navigational tool, mirror, timer, and music box, but also of digital monitoring systems, or smart household appliances. We are witnessing a merging of the immaterial and the material, of data and matter. We have to acknowledge that 'the digital' is not as definite as we might assume: that it is no 'virtual reality' distinct from our everyday world, but a constitutive part of it.

[5] Nicholas Negroponte: 'Beyond Digital', *Wired* 6.12 (1998), at http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/6.12/negroponte.html (accessed June 2014).

In the following I would like to discuss the role of art (and art history) in this context.

Post-DIGITAL ART history

To do so, we first have to take a look at digital art itself. The term 'digital art' has been used to describe those artworks that use digital technology as a core element in the concept of the work. As of today, digital art looks back on more than 50 years of history, including early cybernetic artworks, computer graphics, interactive installations, and internet art. One of the key characteristics of the digital (in the aforementioned sense) is feedback, so that some form of interaction, between different sorts of data, or between a human and a technological system, is often at stake.

This text is a modified version of a blurb I have used on various occasions to promote my book.

In my recent book on 'The Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art' I focused on artworks that invite the interaction of humans with technological systems.[6] I argue that a scholarly analysis of such interactive art requires new theoretical frameworks because it puts the action of the user at center stage.

In digital art, interactivity is incorporated within the design of the system itself. This is one reason why, in the 1990s, digital art was acclaimed as groundbreaking, as the trend-setting art form of the information age. It has been laden with utopias of co-authorship, of the user becoming a true and equal co-producer.[7] On the other hand, digital art has always been closely related to technological innovation. It has therefore repeatedly been accused of spectacularly representing and sacralizing the power structures of technology and science.[8]

[6] Katja Kwastek, *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*, Cambridge, MA (MIT Press), 2013.
[7] For greater detail see Kwastek 2013, pp. 2-3.
[8] See, as an example: Geert Lovink and Pit Schultz, 'Der Sommer der Netzkritik. Brief an die Casseler' (n.d.), at http://www.thing.desk.nl/bilwet/TXT/NK5.txt (accessed June 2014).

We could thus assume that digital art – and especially digital art produced in the 1990s – is all about glorifying digital technology as a harbinger of a new cultural era: modernist, progress oriented, affirmative, and thus related to concepts which we would consider to be the exact opposite of what we have come to emphasize by prefixing something with a 'post'.

I cannot go into detail about this complex issue here, but I would like to suggest the consideration of one important moment of reference in order to better understand the relationship between digital art and digital technology. Digital art is affected by a specific moment of transition, which is the moment of market-readiness of a certain technology – its commodification for extensive public use.

I discussed this question of the threshold of market readiness for the first time in a lecture given at the Institute for Interface Culture at the Kunstuniversität Linz in 2012, at the invitation of Christa Sommerer. I took a case study on Myron Krueger as an example. Until today, it hasn't been published, but I gave the talk again in a class on Creativity here at the VU last fall, on invitation by Jos ten Berge. I think it deserves further research.

Let me give you an example: In the 1980s and early 1990s, when the internet was still limited to an exclusive audience comprised of military and academia, artists were at the forefront of developing collaborative computer-based communication platforms that they hoped would fulfill Bertolt Brecht's idea of many-to-many communication.[9] One of the first platforms to actually make use of the World Wide Web for this endeavor was *De Digitale Stad* Amsterdam, launched in 1994.[10]

[9] See, among others: Dieter Daniels and Gunther Reisinger (eds.), *Net Pioneers 1.0. Contextualizing Early Net-Based Art*, Berlin (Sternberg Press), 2009.
[10] See Walter van der Cruijsen, 'De Digitale Stad Amsterdam' (interview with Tilman Baumgärtel), in: Tilman Baumgärtel, *[net. Art] Materialien zur Netzkunst*, Nuremberg (Verlag für Moderne Kunst), 1999, pp. 64-71.

With the growing commodification of the Web in the 1990s, communication platforms such as *De Digitale Stad* were commercialized, and artists moved on to deconstructing, creatively appropriating, and critically reflecting upon what had become mainstream technologies. One of many examples is the project *Google Will Eat Itself*, launched in 2004 by Paolo Cirio, Alessandro Ludovico, and the artist group ubermorgen.com. The project involves the purchase of Google shares with money earned from placing google advertisements on the websites of the artist group, in a kind of closed circuit transaction.

POST-DIGITAL ART history

So can we argue that digital art becomes post-digital as soon as the technology it applies has been commodified and artists are free to deconstruct, hack, and critique it? Unfortunately, this would be much too simplistic an explanation. A critical handling of their own medium is characteristic of many artworks, digital or analog, before or after having reached a high level of perfection in technical terms.

Let me illustrate this assumption by means of another example: beginning in the 1980s, Canadian artist David Rokeby created the *Very Nervous System* (which we might consider something like the *Nightwatch* of Digital Art).

3 David Rokeby, Very Nervous System*, 1983- (visitor interactions at Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, 2009).*

This paragraph is adapted from my Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art, 2013 (p. 234). The original manuscript was in German, then translated into English by Niamh Warde, again edited by me, and finally copy-edited by Doug Sery of MIT Press.

Visitors to Rokeby's work encounter an empty, silent space. As soon as they move, however, they activate sounds. The system records the visitors' movements via video camera, analyzes them, and responds to them by emitting sequences of sound.

Though the work is usually shown in museum or exhibition contexts, it does not invite visual contemplation, but active, multi-sensorial, aesthetic experiences. The user explores a spatial sound composition via his or her own movement and gestures.

Again, this paragraph (though slightly altered) has been adopted from my Aesthetics book (p. 237).

But the work also invites a critical review of interactive systems. In contrast with common assumptions, Rokeby's concept of interactivity is not focused on the straightforward and intellectually comprehensible control of mediated processes. He has created a system which responds to bodily actions and invites intuitive (re)actions. By doing so, he wanted to challenge the image of the computer as a logical machine with no connection to the body. Rokeby is not interested in control but in resonance, not in power hierarchies but in the recipient and the system adjusting to one another.[11]

Very early on Rokeby was thus encouraging us to reflect on our common assumptions about the digital, scrutinizing the interrelation between digital systems and bodily action. The *Very Nervous System* was produced long before Microsoft launched its Kinect camera, which

[11] David Rokeby, 'The Harmonics of Interaction', *Musicworks 46: Sound and Movement* (Spring 1990), at http://www.davidrokeby.com/harm.html (accessed June 2014).

we might consider the moment of market-readiness for gestural interaction technology. Rokeby needed to develop his own technological system, so a good part of the work was actually technological innovation. But still, it was technological innovation aimed at challenging our assumptions about the digital.

I consciously point out Rokeby's work for several reasons. There are works of digital art which are much more overtly critical in deconstructing surveillance technologies or questioning market mechanisms. Other works have a far more complex narrative, visual, or material structure. But in its minimalism, Rokeby's work operates on the border of the visual arts. Though it is a spatial composition, it features no visual component in the traditional sense. It is rather an interactive, immaterial sound sculpture. As such, it represents another important characteristic of digital art, which is its intermediality: the blurring of the boundaries between different genres of art. It challenges the limitation of art historical research as strictly visual, opening it up to even immaterial forms of 'Gestaltung' (the Dutch word 'Beeldende Kunst' seems to be much more adequate in this respect).

Though such intermediality is not restricted to digital art, digital art allows for feedback between different media and thus takes intermediality to a new level, including its activation by the recipient. In the approach I suggest in my book, next to more traditional art historical perspectives on spatial and temporal structures, materiality and interpretability, I use both performance and game studies to better understand the aesthetic experiences enabled by such work. I analyze the role of the interactive system as a kind of black-box apparatus, which sets the framework for interaction.

This is adopted directly from my Aesthetics book, page 262.

I argue that the aesthetic experience of interactive art is based on rule systems that both complement and counteract one another.

In the user, such conflicting rule systems often evoke frame collisions, and an oscillation of aesthetic experience between immersion and

distanced reflection. Accordingly, interactive art often invites a critical reflection both of our own behavior and of our handling and conceptualization of digital technologies. Thus digital art often takes both a critical stance towards the digital, and scrutinizes the relation between digital technologies and everyday life. So according to the criteria proposed above, such works have been 'post-digital' from the outset.[12]

Let me frame this slightly differently. Some months ago I presented my book at The New School in New York. I was delighted to have Grahame Weinbren in the audience, a pioneer of interactive art, whose work was seminal for the development of this genre.

This was an oral statement by Grahame Weinbren. I cannot guarantee that I paraphrase his argument exactly as he would like it to be represented.

During the discussion, he argued that as much as he appreciated my approach to interaction aesthetics, he couldn't understand why I had labeled the book with the notion of digital art. The processes in question, he argued, had validity far beyond the realm of digital technologies. According to Weinbren, the contextualization of the respective artworks as digital art devaluated their scope. Instead, he proposed to simply treat these works as contemporary art.[13]

I still consider their qualification as digital useful. They feature specific characteristics, which are based on their processual design, but also on the system's initial intransparency to the user. But apart from that, I

[12] Such a denomination is related to, but should not be confused with, what has been called post-internet art: images and objects which comment on digital media practice, without necessarily being processual, networked, or computational themselves.

[13] To understand the dissatisfaction of pioneers like Graham Weinbren with their denomination as digital artists, it is helpful to look at a 2012 essay Claire Bishop wrote for *ArtForum*, within which she complained that contemporary art didn't respond adequately to 'the digital'. She included the interesting statement that "there is, of course, an entire sphere of new media art, but this is a specialized field of its own. It rarely overlaps with the mainstream art world (commercial galleries, the Turner Prize, national pavilions at Venice). While this split is itself undoubtedly symptomatic, the mainstream art world and its response to the digital are the focus of this essay." Claire Bishop, 'Digital Divide. Contemporary Art and New Media', *ArtForum* 7 (2012) pp. 434-441.

agree that many of these works are seminal contributions in revisiting processes of aesthetic experience in much more general terms. This is why I see great potential in putting the research of digital processes in a broader perspective by prefixing them with a 'post'.

A post-digital art history also, specifically, encourages new perspectives on pre-digital art, and on aesthetic experience in general:

- Ongoing interest in John Cage is due, of course, to his pioneering role in 20th century music. But it is also due to him having introduced chance operations into art. As such, Cage is a digital artist avant la lettre.
- The reason I offered a class on Robert Morris here at the VU last fall was my interest not only in his take on participatory art, but also my conviction that the 'theatrical' or phenomenological approach of Minimal Art resonates in works like the one of Rokeby.
- Even today's research on Italian Renaissance art can profit from contemporary perspectives on image circulation, far beyond simple 1:1 analogies.

In this line, framing the research perspective taken by art historians today as 'post-digital' can be of great use. Let me go back to Rokeby (and Donatello) once more to elaborate on this.

Again, a modified adoption from Aesthetics book (p. 238).

Rokeby aims at sensitizing the visitors' perceptive capacities. Ideally, he wants the change in the recipients' perception to last beyond the time spent interacting with the system. He wants a residue of the experience made with the piece to remain in the visitors, so that even when they have left the installation, they will still have the feeling that the sounds they hear around them are directly connected to their movements.[14]

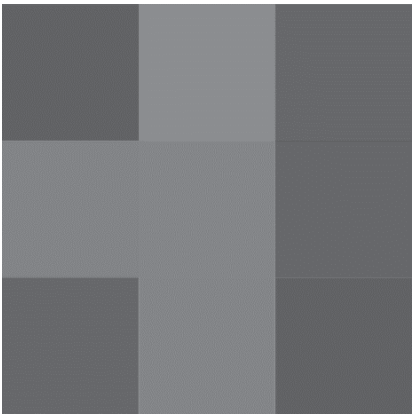
[14] Lizzie Muller and Caitlin Jones, 'Interview with David Rokeby', Linz 2009, Question 4, at http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2187 (accessed June 2014).

Now you probably have deduced why, in addition to addressing the issue of out-of-time costumes in Donatello's relief, I shared my drawing experience with you at the beginning of this lecture.

Both my experience, and the one aimed at by Rokeby, point to the same phenomenon: experiences stemming from the use of one medium may inform the perception of actions made within other mediated or non-mediated environments.

From Hirshhorn lecture (yet unpublished).

4 Basil Bangs, Le Pixel Umbrella*, 2011, canvas, 190 cm diameter.*



5 Richard Paul Lohse, Diagonalordnung aus heller Gleichung und Kontrast *1956/1975, oil on canvas, 120 × 120 cm, R. P. Lohse-Stiftung, Zürich.*

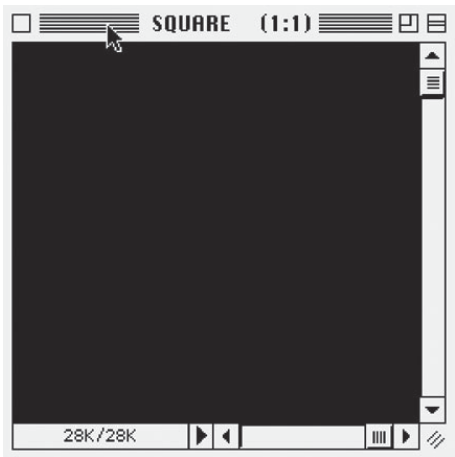
Which brings me back to the New Aesthetic. Let us take up the example of the 'pixelated umbrella'. If we are honest, this is no pixelated umbrella, but an umbrella that we perceive as pixelated, because we have gotten used to the visual language of pixelated images.

If we compare it with, for example, Richard Paul Lohse's abstract geometric paintings, we have to concede that there have been compositions made entirely out of colored squares long before there were pixels. It is our perceptive formation which makes us see the umbrella as pixelated.

6 Dagny Holm Jensen with LEGO Koala.

The orca whale is another example. Set against a photo of Dagny Holm Jensen, product designer for the LEGO Company, posing with a LEGO koala, we have to acknowledge that a similar voxel aesthetic existed long before voxel graphics were introduced. It is the context which shapes our perception.

This is another reason why a post-digital research perspective can be useful. It emphasizes the fact that 'the digital' has become so commonplace that it has started to influence our ways of perception (and behavior), very generally.



7 George Pusenkoff, Big Square 28 KB (1:1)*, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 90 cm, Waldenbuch, Museum Ritter.*

And again, it was an artist who made this point very early on. In 1996, Russian artist George Pusenkoff presented a painting entitled *Big Square 28 KB (1:1)*. It shows a black square – an obvious reference to Kazimir Malevich's masterpiece of 1915 – but in the guise of a (painted) computer screen window that displays nothing but a black monochrome plane. This is a classic work of appropriation art, but it is also a bitmap gone analogue.

It illustrates that our acquaintance with digital imaging inevitably feeds back on how we perceive art from the past.[15]

In the 1970s Michael Baxandall wrote his famous book on *Painting and Experience in 15th century Italy*.[16] One of his main goals was to discuss what he called the 'period eye'. To better understand Italian Renaissance art, he argued, we need to know how people at that time were perceiving images, to what they paid attention, and which perceptive and cognitive competencies from everyday life they would activate to look at paintings.

The examples I have presented concern our contemporary visual culture. But they also encourage us to look at paintings from the past not only with a period eye, but also with a consciously contemporary eye.[17] Our contemporary 'post-digital' perception can indeed generate new and interesting insights on historical art and culture.

But let me outline yet another challenge of what I suggest we call post-digital art history by looking again at the New Aesthetic tumblr. I already mentioned that it contains a few works which we would easily qualify as 'high art', but also lots of design objects and technological gadgets. We might identify this as another symptom of the increasing ubiquity of digital technology.

'The digital' has led to new forms of amateur creativity, reaching from Internet Memes (ideas, images, or texts spread via the Internet) and YouTube videos, via flash mobs (public performances organized via digital media), to devices of the so called maker culture (Do-It-Yourself

[15] On the other hand, these examples also show that what we perceive as characteristics of contemporary media technologies is often based upon very general formal, logical, and sometimes even philosophical principles.

[16] Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in 15th century Italy*, Oxford (Oxford University Press), 1972.

[17] See also Verena Krieger, 'Der Blick der Postmoderne durch die Moderne auf sich selbst. Zur Originalitätskritik von Rosalind Krauss', in Verena Krieger (ed.), *Kunstgeschichte & Gegenwartskunst. Vom Nutzen & Nachteil der Zeitgenossenschaft*, Vienna (Böhlau) 2008, pp. 143-161.

movement with a focus on new technologies). While amateur creativity has been an important part of everyday culture ever since, today it profits from the virtually unlimited accessibility of tools and dissemination platforms. Today's creative practice can rely upon sophisticated off the shelf technologies like Photoshop, 3D printers, or the Kinect camera, and open source construction kits such as Arduino or Raspberry PI Computers. Furthermore, anyone can easily present and disseminate their products online without the need to pass any editorial or curatorial selection process. And while many Internet Memes and products of the maker culture may be no more than digital jokes or design gadgets, there is actually no categorical reason as to why there shouldn't be highly reflective and accomplished works among these products of amateur creativity, which have the potential to endure as pertinent cultural statements.

Again, I can't go into detail, but these few remarks might suffice to illustrate what Florian Cramer describes as a "messy state of media, arts and design."[18] We are facing a blurring of the boundaries between amateur and professional practice, between the digital and the material – a merging of the visual, the performative, and the acoustic. As has been frequently argued, this messiness has been an important undercurrent throughout 20th century culture – just think of Dadaist performances, Duchamp's concept of the Readymade, or of John Cage's work between music, performance, and visual art.[19] Even more so, there is good reason to suppose that this messiness has important parallels also in pre-modern times, which might have been overshadowed by our desire to construct a coherent, nicely organized history of art and culture, with clearly distinguishable genres and a stable canon. This canon has come to be questioned in many respects. In this line the post-digital goes along not only with the post-modern,

[18] Cramer 2014.
[19] Jameson 1992, p. 4, but also, on a much broader scope: Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern*, Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press), 1993.

but also with other ‘posts’, such as the post-colonial, or the post-medium condition.

Concerning the cultural validity of something like the New Aesthetic, it is eye opening to compare and contrast it with Fredric Jameson’s concept of the postmodern. In addition to characterizing the postmodern as “theorizing its own condition of possibility,”[20] Jameson identifies superficiality and depthlessness as its key characteristics.[21] He further observes a commodification of culture, within which “contents are just more images.”[22] At the same time, Jameson qualifies “every position on postmodernism in culture” as a political stance in relation to multinational capitalism.[23] While the New Aesthetic has likewise been criticized for its overriding concern with the surface, James Bridle counters this assertion. He argues that, “the New Aesthetic is not superficial, it is not concerned with beauty or surface texture. It is deeply engaged with the politics and politicization of networked technology, and seeks to explore, catalogue, categorize, connect and interrogate these things.”[24]

As much as I have difficulties seeing the projects presented on the New Aesthetic tumblr as a whole as deeply engaged, I am convinced that Bridle’s project presents a take on this topic that deserves our attention. In its heterogeneity it fosters the uncanny apprehension that the

[20] Jameson 1992, p. IX.
[21] Jameson 1992, p. 6.
[22] Jameson 1992, p. IX. Also Cramer starts his article with a discussion of the prefix ‘post’. He argues, however, that it should be used instead in terms like post-punk or post-colonial, things that are ongoing but come to be viewed differently. He objects to parallels with post-modernism or post-histoire, concerning their idea of an 'end of history'. While I agree with Cramer that the idea of an end of history is outdated, I still see striking and very fruitful parallels between the concept of the post-digital and the post-modern, at least in the way Fredric Jameson discusses it. Concerning the 'end of history' thesis and its potential resonance with the concept of the post-digital, see also Geoff Cox, ‘Prehistories of the Post-digital: or, some old problems with post-anything’, *ARPA, A Peer Reviewed Journal About*, 3.1 (2014): Post-Digital Research, http://www.aprja.net/?p=1314 (accessed June 2014).
[23] Jameson 1992, p. 3.
[24] James Bridle: ‘The New Aesthetic and its Politics’, *booktwo.org*, June 12, 2013, http://booktwo.org/notebook/new-aesthetic-politics/ (accessed June 2014).

increasing ubiquity of the digital has an impact on our society that we still do not fully comprehend.

Let me show you an excerpt from a video by Hito Steyerl, which was featured at the Venice Biennial last year (and thus has definitely been sanctioned as high art). Instead of presenting a collection of scattered artifacts, web-entries, and visual gimmicks, it puts the merging of the digital and the material into some broader, though equally messy context. The video is entitled, *How Not to Be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .Mov file*. It is divided into five lessons, each of which illustrates various ways of being or becoming invisible by merging into a world of pictures. Though claiming to be organized along clear didactic lines, the 'lessons' ingeniously fluctuate between featuring human behaviors (to hide, to camouflage, to disguise), and the handling of objects (to remove); the processing of digital images (to scroll, to wipe, to erase, to shrink, to mask, to key), 'living conditions' of humans (living in a gated community, or being in an airport, factory, or museum); and finally, the 'experience' of digital entities (being a dead pixel, being a Wi-Fi signal, being spam caught by a filter). In this compilation of human, material, and conceptual metamorphoses, Steyerl presents the merging of the material and the digital in the form of a playful video-editing endeavor, making this imagined future (?) even more eerie.

As the video continues Steyerl stages a seamless transition from human life to digital imagery, featuring disappeared people, who are, according to her, "annihilated, eliminated, eradicated, deleted, dispensed with, filtered, processed, selected, separated, wiped out" – only to then "retreat into 3D animations" and "reemerge as pixels" to "merge into a world made of images".[25]

[25] Hito Steyerl: *How Not to Be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .Mov File*, 2013, HD video file, min. 9:10-10:05.

Towards the end of the video, we see a group of people wearing burqas. They dance on a discharged resolution target in the Californian desert, and later "throw off the cloak of representation,"[26] while "happy pixels hop off into low resolution."[27]

8 Hito Steyerl, How Not to Be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .Mov File*, 2013, HD video file, single screen, 14 min, screenshot, min. 12:43.*

Don't worry, I am not going to reveal that under my toga I am wearing a green catsuit, and I am not planning to hop off into low resolution. But what the video shows quite emphatically is that beneath the colorful, speedy, playful, and joyful surface of image circulation, there is a global society that is subject to complex processes of mediation, surveillance, inclusion, and exclusion which are closely linked to the fact that 'the digital' has permeated the every day. Art history's visual and analytic competencies can be of great help in uncovering such interrelations.

But I do not want to close my lecture without at least briefly covering another possible reading of my lecture title, which would focus on digital art history, as a subfield of the digital humanities.

[26] Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen*, 2013, min. 12:15.
[27] Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen,* 2013, min. 15:00.

Post-DIGITAL ART HISTORY

I talked about these Cologne digital humanities experiences at a Digital Humanities conference in Passau in March this year. It is not published, but the video documentation of the (German language) talk is online.

In 1992 the Bildarchiv Foto Marburg presented a joint program for the documentation of German art and architecture at the international congress of art history in Berlin. I was thrilled by the vision of creating a collaborative database of our cultural heritage, and immediately applied for a student job at the Cologne image archive, one of the project partners.

I was employed, and, in the coming years, profited greatly from documenting a large number of reproductions from a collection of medieval manuscripts. While the documentation of complex layers of such multi-authored manuscripts by means of a normative database was already quite a challenge, the real challenge arose once I switched jobs to focus on the documentation of the new acquisitions of the Museum Ludwig, Cologne's Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. One of the first acquisitions I had to deal with was a work of American artist James Lee Byars. It was called *The Perfect Smile*, and it consisted of a (very short) performance of the artist giving a smile to his audience. I did my best to represent this work in the database (of course there was a title, an acquisition date, an artist, etc., so I could fill in the mandatory fields), but I was well aware that my endeavor was somewhat absurd. While this is an admittedly extreme example, it clearly illustrates one of the biggest challenges facing the digital humanities: how can we do justice to the specificity, individuality, often conceptual, or even ironic nature of artistic work, and how can we actively create smart links between individual, material, or ephemeral artworks, and our digital systems?

Of course, if it comes to the practical implementation of such claims, we have to admit that steps are small and might not be as dramatic as

we would like them to be. The attentive digital humanities practitioners in this room may have realized that I already touched upon two examples that have contributed, in a small way, to solving the problems, or challenges, posed by digital documentation.

9 Scale model for Donatello relief.

The first concerns the interrelation between an original work of art and its digital representation. The small scale model (developed in the early 1990s for Cologne museums) that accompanied the reproduction of the Donatello relief, is a tiny step taken to make people aware that they are viewing a representation, and to give them an idea of the original scale of the represented object.

The second concerns research into aesthetic experience, and was part of my Rokeby example. The documentary video I presented was produced as a result of the foregone conclusion that neither a description of the technological setup, nor a log of interactions with the system, would constitute a meaningful record of the project. Therefore, we decided to create what two colleagues of mine have deemed a 'documentary collection', which contains photographic and textual documentation of various versions of the work, an artist interview, and, most notably, an extensive documentation of visitor experiences using the method of Video Cued Recall.[28] We recorded their activity, replayed it to them afterwards, and recorded their comments together with the documentation.

Both endeavors are just tiny contributions to what we might like to call 'post-digital humanities' – a use of digital technologies with due consideration for the human scale of our contemporary and historical culture. In both cases we used digital technologies (image editing

[28] David Rokeby, *Very Nervous System* (1983-), Documentary Collection, edited by Caitlin Jones and Lizzie Muller, at http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2186 (accessed June 2014).

software, digital-recording and editing technology), but not elaborate computational methods such as image recognition, video content analysis, or data mining. Of course, such technologies have proven very useful for other research questions, and I don't want to be understood as arguing against computational methods. My main claim is for the conscious use of digital technology in whichever way best fits the specific works and contexts being researched.

Yet we also face another challenge, for which the New Aesthetic is again a telling example. As I already mentioned, the New Aesthetic was presented in the form of a tumblr blog. Its launch was announced by James Bridle on yet another blog. He also presented his collection at several conferences. But the term mainly became known as a result of a review by science fiction author Bruce Sterling that was featured in the popular online magazine 'wired.com'.[29] From then on, the concept spread through a stream of blog entries, forum discussions, and Twitter messages. James Bridle describes the New Aesthetic as "an attempt to 'write' critically about the network in the vernacular of the network itself" which consciously "does not conform to the formal shapes […] expected by critics and academics."[30]

I would guess that many of the audience members, especially, maybe, those wearing togas to show that they identify with certain common ideals and traditions, start to feel very uncomfortable here. And I can assure you that I share this unease. At the same time, however, we have to acknowledge that amongst the many blog entries, and even Twitter posts, there may be statements that are remarkably thought through and eye opening. Again, we have to deal with a form of messiness here: a blurring of the boundaries between amateur and professional practice, a diminishing power of the traditional gate-keepers and canon-guards, new forms of writing, and a new speed of conversation, which has both

[29] Bruce Sterling, 'An Essay on the New Aesthetic', *Wired (beyond the beyond)*, 2 April 2012, at http://www.wired.com/beyond_the_beyond/2012/04/an-essay-on-the-new-aesthetic/ (accessed June 2014).
[30] Bridle 2013.

positive and negative sides. Finding smart ways to deal with these developments is another important task of the digital humanities.[31]

POST-DIGITAL ART HISTORY

I came to the VU at the very day the department started a new, so-called 'broad bachelor', named MKDA, Media/Kunst/ Design/Architectuur. Already familiar with the department's successful interdisciplinary Research Master (VAMA), I was fascinated by this further innovative approach, which for me entails the pertinent broadening of art historical education into the field of visual culture and Bildwissenschaften, but (as opposed to the German connotation) includes three-dimensional object and spatial constructions, and also, explicitly, the moving image. I was quite astonished, when I took the occasion to discuss this newly established program with 3rd year students, they complained that apparently the VU had decided to abolish their BA program in art history. I am far from blind to the fact that the introduction of the broad bachelor also had financial reasons, and I share the recently expressed concerns of our students about the increasing monetization of universities. But I do not share students' worries concerning the reform of content. I actually consider such reforms essential.

The knowledge one can acquire within a certain amount of time, and the fields of study one can cover within the span of an educational program are not infinite. But in addition to offering insights into the increasingly complex narratives and theories that have been constructed by humanities disciplines, we must open up fields and interconnections to allow for new discoveries. We need to expand the traditional narratives of our discipline into new contexts, continuously question, reframe, and revise them from our contemporary point of view.

[31] Concerning possible futures of scholarly publication, see for example Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*, New York (NYU Press), 2011, online draft including comments from open peer review process at http://mcpress.media-commons.org/plannedobsolescence/ (accessed June 2014).

University education has the important responsibility to encourage independent thinking, transform curiosity into scholarly research, and enable younger generations to critically engage with our society by exploring its reconditions. In this sense I fully subscribe to the VU's motto of looking further, while at the same time I want to qualify that looking further always also affords a looking back, a looking more closely, and a looking critically. Doing so, with special consideration for the fact that our contemporary perspective is informed by the effects of digital technology, is – in my opinion – a key task of a post-digital art history.

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Even before I started to work at the VU, Koos Bosma, Professor of Architectural History and Heritage Studies, and Head of the Department of Art & Culture, organized a department dinner to celebrate the closing of the academic year, but also to introduce me to my new colleagues, including Ginette Verstraete, Professor of Cultural Studies.

The very week that I started my work at the VU, I was invited for a meeting of all professors of art history in the Netherlands to discuss a recent disciplinary survey. One month later, the VU Faculty of Arts organized a two-day meeting of all the staff members to discuss current issues.

From these diverse meetings on, which were followed by further activities, I had the impression that I had entered an open-minded and interdisciplinary, intellectual community ready to actively take position. I want to thank everyone for the warm welcome.

I also, and especially, want to thank the students of the VU – it has been a pleasure to work with you during the past academic year, and I am very much looking forward to seeing you back at the VU in September to continue your studies, to receive your well-deserved diplomas, or just

as fellows with certain shared ideals and traditions, which luckily enough extend beyond the circle of toga-wearers.

Mijn dank gaat verder aan het bestuur van de Stichting VU VUmc, het College van Bestuur, en het bestuur van de Letterenfaculteit (binnenkort de faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen), met name aan onze decaan, Michel ter Hark.

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But I also want to thank my family, who never ceased to believe in me, and who have even come over from the other side of the world, namely Shanghai, to celebrate this day with me. And finally, thank you Jojo. Life is just enchanting with you at my side.

Ik heb gezegd

Picture credits

1 Archive of the author

2 From zouch magazine: http://zouchmagazine.com/the-digital-orca-by-douglas-coupland/#.U5RtNChUT5w

3 Archive of the author

4 From Basil Bangs website: http://basilbangs.com/product/le-pixel-umbrella/

5 From artist's website: http://www.lohse.ch/popup_9quadrate_d.html

6 LEGO Group / www.miniland.nl

7 provided by George Pusenkoff

8 screenshot from video, provided by Hito Steyerl

9 archive of the author

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